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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes results of a survey examining educational attitudes, lifestyle, and aspirations of Hispanic students in south Texas. Many students live in impoverished, rural, unincorporated subdivisions called "colonias" that are growing around Laredo, Texas, and other border cities. An introduction to the Texas/Mexico border cities discusses immigration, recent population growth, and impacts on living conditions and education. The survey was developed at the behest of Communities in Schools-Laredo, Inc., a dropout prevention program. It was administered by students in an undergraduate research methods class to 251 secondary school students in 4 south Laredo schools. Tabulated results are presented for all survey questions. Spanish was the primary language in 61 percent of homes. About 76 percent of students lived with both parents. Students watched an average of 3.6 hours of television per day, primarily situation comedies about teenagers. Student responses reveal strong interest in continuing education through high school and beyond, broad recognition of the importance of education for good jobs, general satisfaction with school and teachers for three-fourths of students, and serious discomfort with various aspects of school for about one-fifth of students. Only 48 percent of respondents felt safe in school. Most students believed that they were responsible for what they did in life (88 percent), that they could do what they attempted (75 percent), and that hard work was more important than luck (69 percent). Despite the 40-50 percent dropout rate for low-income Hispanic populations, the sample exhibited exceptionally high aspirations for education and lifestyle and expressed an optimistic attitude toward and belief in hard work and dedication. Contains 33 references. (RAH)

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EDUCATIONAL AND LIFE STYLE ASPIRATIONS OF SECONDARY STUDENTS IN BORDER COLONIAS OF LAREDO, TEXAS

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EDUCATIONAL AND LIFE STYLE ASPIRATIONS OF SECONDARY STUDENTS IN BORDER COLONIAS OF LAREDO, TEXAS

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Political and national boundaries develop unique blendings of cultural expressions and opportunities. The boundary between Mexico and the United States, stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, has been an area alive with excitement and challenge as people from Mexico seek immigration, legally or illegally, into the United States in search of jobs. The development of the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) has brought increased interest about activities along the border. This paper will include two sections. The first section will summarize social conditions along the border, with particular attention to conditions in areas surrounding Laredo, Texas. The second section will present the summary and results of a questionnaire survey measuring educational and life style aspirations which was administered in the fall of 1993 to 251 secondary students in schools serving rural colonias surrounding Laredo.

SECTION ONE

Growth of Colonias and Border Cities

Since 1930, migration to the cities along the Texas/Mexico border has transformed small border towns into medium and large sized cities. People from Mexico and other parts of Latin America were drawn to the border in search of work, seeing there the opportunity to make a better life for themselves and their families. In the last two decades, migration to border cities has intensified. The devaluation of the Mexican peso in 1982 and the

establishment of the maquiladora system of industry with the creation of increasing job opportunities have turned border cities into boom towns (Parrillo,1991; Loe, 1992; Weeks and Ham-Chande, 1992; Arreola, 1993).

Much of the growth related to border cities develops in rural colonias surrounding the cities. The report of a survey done in 1988 for the Texas Department of Human Services states "that colonias are rural and unincorporated sub-divisions characterized by substandard housing, inadequate plumbing and sewage disposal systems, and inadequate access to clean water. They are highly concentrated poverty pockets that are physically and legally isolated from neighboring cities" (Salinas, 1988:pg. iii). This survey of living conditions in rural areas of South Texas and West Texas border counties documented that colonia residents are Hispanic, young and poor. Two-thirds of colonia residents speak Spanish as their primary language in the home. Although the average household income was $9,137, 85% of the residents own their own home. Unregulated rural settings were the only affordable land on which to claim home ownership (Salinas, 1988).

A sample of 1200 households revealed the following characteristics: Average age - 22 years

Average number in household - 5 people

Percent born in Mexico - 35.5%

Percent never attending High School - 21%

Percent dropping out of High School - 46%

Percent graduating from High School - 27%

Percent college graduates - 3% (Salinas, 1988)

Immigrants to the border colonias have often abandoned ancestral homes in Mexico with hopes and dreams of making a better life for themselves and their families. They come in search of the dream of work and they are willing to work hard. They encourage and push their children to succeed as students and get jobs to better their lives. However, many children neither work nor go to school. They roam the colonias in gangs getting high on drugs and inhalants (True, 1992).

Until recently the migrant flow was primarily men traveling for seasonal work, however census and immigration data indicate that women now account for about half of the Mexican immigrants who settle in the United States (Golden, 1992). Over the last two decades Mexican women have grown more independent. Since the economic crisis of 1982, more have entered the labor force. Women left behind by migrant husbands are becoming more in control of their lives. Many migrate to the borders in search of jobs. A survey of 718 women who came into the United States at Tijuana found only 10% going to join families, while 67% were seeking jobs (Golden, 1992). Managers of the maquiladora industries on the border favor women workers because they work for less and are more docile than men. Men who migrate generally migrate out of the border area. Julieta Quilodran examined the marriage patterns on the border by first analyzing the sex ratio. She discovered an imbalance along the border with a scarcity of men in the young adult ages, relative to the number of women (Weeks and Ham-Chande, 1992:89). Maria de la Paz Lopez focused

on major Mexican border cities and found a consistent 71% of households composed of nuclear families (Weeks and Ham-Chande, 1992:90).

Laredo and Webb County (Texas)

Webb County is situtated in South Texas on the Rio Grande River across from the Mexican state of Tamaulipas and the city of Nuevo Laredo. In the last several decades the population has escalated rapidly from 72,000 in 1970 to 134,000 in 1990 (Laredo Morning Times, July 24, 1994). The city of Laredo is the county seat and the major population concentration of the county. Laredo, the busiest inland port on the Mexican border, has become a North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA) boomtown. In the early 1990's Laredo ranked second after Las Vegas in the rate of metropolitan growth. By June of 1994, the population of Laredo had increased to 155,000 (NAFTA Digest, July, 1994:3).

However, while population boomed, so did poverty. According to the 1990 census, Laredo was first in the country with the largest percentage of people living below the poverty line - 37.3% Several factors work to keep many residents poor. The population of Laredo is young with about half below the age of 25. Nearly 40% of the households contain 5 or more persons, and 25% of the families are headed by single parents, the majority of them women (Loe, 1992).

Much of Laredo's growth is attributable to immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries who live in rural colonias surrounding the city (Simonson, 1994). El Cenizo is one of 27 colonias subdivisions lying south of Laredo. Noemi

Guel is a 29 year old mother of five who bought a 1/4 acre lot for $6,000, paying $100 a month. She and her 11 year old son have scavenged for plywood, sheetrock and building material to build a three room home for the family. She moved from Nuevo Laredo to Laredo so her children could attend U.S. schools (Amir, 1994).

A major motivator for immigration into the United States is the opportunity to provide education for the children. The influx of students from Mexico strains the resources of the two school districts in Webb County. Edgardo Bueno, the Director of Student Services of the Laredo Independent School District stated, "We have investigated approximately 1,200 students that reportedly came from Nuevo Laredo and some of them met the resident requisites while some did not. We are confronted with a predicament where the school district, corresponding to state law has to educate all children residing within our boundaries but when some of the students give a fraudulent address in Laredo and reside in Nuevo Laredo; it is not equitable on us the taxpayers" (Laredo Morning News, Feb 13, 1992). State law requires school districts to educate all school-age children that reside within its school district boundaries regardless of their legal or illegal residency status.

Survey to Identify Barriers to Education

The NAFTA economic program has drawn increasing national and international attention to the problems along the border. In May of 1990 a $160,000 grant was awarded by the Ford Foundation with the objective to "identify human capital assets of low income

households" on the Texas/Mexico Border, "to measure the attitudes, aspirations, expectations, and plans of the members of low income households concerning their future", and "to identify any barriers to skill acquisition and employment opportunities", and to provide information in the formulation of policy (Schauer and King, 1992). This survey inventoried human resources in the Texas Counties of El Paso, Webb, Hidalgo, and Cameron. Interviews were administered in 2,800 households which had been randomly selected. Analysis of the survey data suggested that 75% of the respondents expected to further their education and training. Obstacles to obtaining further education and training were found to include language barriers, available transportation, need for day care and inadequate information about available educational opportunities. In regard to media usage, it was found that while 97% of the respondents utilized the television, only 64% of the respondents read newspapers on a regular basis (Schauer and King, 1992).

The survey also measured the residents' attitudes toward the difficulty of life, the role of luck in their lives, feelings of self worth, and belief in the degree of control they had over their lives. About 23% attached a heavy weight to luck in their lives, while 80% believed more in hard work and dedication than in luck. Eighty percent or more felt that they had control over their life and destiny. Attitudes concerning "difficulty of life" showed that 35-45% felt that life in general is difficult, while 55-65% have a basically optimistic outlook (Schauer and King, 1992).

Border Development Projects

The summer of 1994 brought several new development initiatives to the area of south Laredo. The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs announced a $208,000 grant to rehabilitate homes for 14 low-income families in colonia Rio Bravo located just south of Laredo (Simonson, July 2, 1994). Texas A&M University officials opened the long-awaited community center in colonia El Cenizo to bring social services to the neighborhood (Simonson, June 21, 1994). The San Antonio based binational NADBank provided $3 billion in government and private loans to finance environmental projects along the U.S./ Mexico border (NAFTA, July, 1994). A $255,000 grant from the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs enabled Webb County to assume control of a water plant that had been privately owned. The County judge, Mercurio Martinez said, "It is our intent to provide services to Rio Bravo and to El Cenizo and to try to develop all of the southern part of the county of Webb. Water and waste water services are the key to bring resources and employment" (Simonson, July 15, 1994).

SECTION TWO: STUDENT LIFE STYLE SURVEY

Background and Purpose

A student life style survey was conducted in November, 1993 in response to a need of the Communities in Schools (CIS) - Laredo, Inc. In September 1993, the executive director of CIS - Laredo queried the Soc 403 Social Science Research class at Texas A&M International University about the possibility of including the gathering of data for CIS as a part of the class

requirements. Her letter explained the background and purpose of the CIS program and the need for data feedback to help them serve the students with whom they work. The following paragraphs from this letter explain the purpose of this research project.

> "Communities in Schools is a 12-month in-school dropout prevention program located in 26 cities in Texas, and servicing over 12,500 students. CIS brings together a partnership of local, state, and federal government agencies as well as private organizations, corporate enterprise, and the educational institutions in the community.
>
> CIS-Laredo is housed at four local schools in South Laredo, and soon to be in two schools in West and North Laredo. In addressing and servicing the needs of the 'at-risk' student populations of our two school districts, we find many factors that contribute to the drop-out problem. As we attempt to gather data pertinent to this student population, we seem to find certain 'gaps' that are not totally indicative of reasons why these youngsters do poorly in school, have disruptive behaviors, join gangs, become pregnant at early teen years, etc.
>
> At this point, we feel additional research could be conducted to hopefully gather data that would give us some more definite indicators of the factors that impact the 'at-risk' population.
>
> (Cynthia Jackson, Communities in Schools-Laredo,Inc. 9/21/93)

The Social Science Research Methods class (SOC 403) instructs students in the theory, methodology, collection and analysis of data in order to better understand social relationships and enable better policy decisions. It was decided by the professor and students that this project would represent a valuable learning experience and a contribution to community awareness. Members of the research class developed and administered a student survey, with the assistance of the CIS staff. The project was planned and directed by the professor Marjorie L. Coppock. The questionnaire administration was carried out by the students as a class requirement under the supervision and direction of CIS

personnel in the participating schools. The coding and initial tabulation were done by the students.

Sample of the Study

The questionnaires were administered to students in four schools in south Laredo within a one week period in mid-November of 1993. The schools included in the sample have two distinguishing characteristics:

* Over 80% of the students are classified as "at-risk" through state definition
* Over 80% of the parent's incomes are below the general average.

The Texas State Board of Education has outlined 16 criteria which may be used to designate "at risk" students in grades 7-12. The student:

1. has not been promoted one or more times in grades 1-6
2. is 2 or more years below grade level in reading or math
3. has failed 1 or more of the reading, writing or math sections of TEAMS/TAAS test
4. has failed at least 2 courses in 1 or more semesters and is not expected to graduate within 4 years
5. resides in a residential placement facility
6. is sexually, physically or psychologically abused
7. has excessive absences based on district guidelines
8. engages in delinquent conduct
9. lacks a fixed or regular home (homeless)
10. is a teen parent or pregnant
11. is a substance abuser
12. has limited English speaking ability
13. is a slow learner
14. enrolls late in school
15. is an underachiever/unmotivated
16. exhibits other characteristics that indicate a high risk of dropping out of school.

The following chart lists the schools and the classes which were included in the sample.

Sample for Student Life Style Survey

School	Classes
C.Middle School	1 TAAS Remediation class
M. High School	1 English class 1 Health class 1 History class
U. Junior High School	1 Social Studies class 1 7th Grade Reading class 1 8th Grade Reading class 2 Physical Education classes 1 Mechanics class
U. High School	4 English classes

Developing the questionnaire

In forming questions to be included in the questionnaire, recent literature was consulted which discussed and analyzed factors associated with school success rates and drop out rates (See references at end of report). An initial questionnaire was developed and presented to the CIS office for consideration. The CIS staff administrator showed the questionnaire to the principals of the schools involved with the CIS program. Six schools were approached, four schools agreed to participate in the study. Some questions inquiring about sexual behavior and drug and alcohol abuse were removed from the questionnaire as being too sensitive.

The students participating in the survey were given written instruction at the beginning of the questionnaire as follows:

> "Answers to these questions will help the school staff to better serve the needs and interests of the students they work with. Please take the time to answer the questions thoughtfully. Your name is not needed."

Characteristics of the Sample

251 questionnaires were administered and analyzed.
(Because of non-response, not all totals equal 251)

* What school do you attend?

(N)	(School)
84	M. High School
59	U. High School
20	C. Middle School
87	U. South Junior High
250	

* What is your sex?

(N)	(Sex)
109	Female
124	Male
18	no response
251	

* Where were you born?

(N)	(Location)
181	Laredo
19	Mexico
27	Other location in Texas
15	Other location in U.S. (not Texas)
1	Foreign country (not Mexico)
243	

* How many people are living in your household?

(N)	(people in household)
4	two
61	three-four
106	five-six
55	seven-eight
16	nine-ten
9	eleven-seventeen
251	

average (from raw data) = 5.8

* Mother lives in household

(N)	(Response)
242	Yes
9	No
251	

* Father lives in household

(N)	(Response)
191	Yes
60	No
251	

* What language is spoken in your home?

(N)	(Language)
18	English
151	Spanish
80	English & Spanish
249	

* About how many hours of television do you watch a day?

(N)	(Hours)
2	0
73	1-2
103	3-4
46	5-6
21	7-8
245	

Average (from raw data) = 3.6

* Does your family get newspapers or magazines at home?

(N)	(Response)
164	Yes
75	No
239	

* In What Neighborhood Do You Live?

(N)	(Neighborhood)
33	Rio Bravo
26	Santo Nino
16	El Cenizo
14	Santa Rita
14	Ghost town

(42 other neighborhoods were listed)

* What Are Your Favorite Television Shows?

(N)	Show
50	Fresh Prince
44	Saved by the Bell
31	Who's the Boss
30	Full House
27	Blossom
22	Beavis and Butthead
11	Spanish Novelas
10	Family Matters
8	MTV
7	911

(34 other shows were named by 1-5 respondents)

* What Kind Of Job Would You Like?

(N)	(Job)
Professional	
19	Teacher
19	Lawyer
12	Medical field
15	Doctor
9	Nurse
5	Veterinarian
5	Architect
3	Psychologist
2	Science
1 (each)	Genetics, Pharmacist, Sexologist, Engineer, Electrical Engineer NASA scientist
11	Fine Arts (singer, florist, DJ, Actor, Dancing, etc.)
9	Skilled Labor
Business	
14	Secretary/Office
7	Computers
3	Business
2	Export/Import
1 (each)	Banker, Sales, accountant, avertising
Sports	
9	Football, basketball
Community Service	
28	Law Enforcement
1 (each)	pilot, fireman, railroad, politician

For attitudes about lifestyle, the following 20 questions were included in the questionnaire. The following instructions were given to the students:
The following questions ask about your feelings and opinions. Please respond by placing the number on the line beside each statement that best expresses your answer.

1 - Strongly agree
2 - Agree
3 - Undecided
4 - Disagree
5 - Strongly disagree

The number of students responding to each category is listed below each statement.

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Total
School is a place where I feel comfortable.					
50	133	35	16	10	(244)
School is a place where I feel safe.					
32	85	61	46	22	(246)
I am able to accomplish what I attempt to do.					
73	109	34	21	7	(244)
I believe more in hard work and dedication than luck.					
81	87	50	20	7	(245)
If you get ahead, it is because you are lucky.					
15	42	36	99	54	(246)
Everything I do always turns out wrong.					
8	22	71	98	45	(244)
I am responsible for what I do in life.					
128	90	15	8	6	(247)
I want to graduate from high school.					
207	27	7	3	3	(247)
My family wants me to graduate from high school.					
198	39	8	2	2	(249)

(cont.)
1 - Strongly agree
2 - Agree
3 - Undecided
4 - Disagree
5 - Strongly disagree

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Total
Education is important in obtaining a good job.					
194	41	6	3	4	(248)
I would like to go to college.					
161	44	32	6	4	(247)
I want to complete high school before I get married.					
171	50	20	4	2	(247)
I want to complete high school before I have a child.					
169	42	22	9	4	(246)
I would not go to school if I didn't have to go.					
22	29	49	73	74	(247)
Most of the teachers at school are trying to help me.					
82	105	26	15	16	(244)
My parent(s) are interested in the progress I make at school.					
155	65	17	6	2	(245)
My mother helps me with my school work.					
44	75	32	72	24	(247)
My father helps me with my school work.					
46	56	28	64	47	(241)
I cut class whenever I can.					
21	26	29	65	105	(246)
It seems like I am always getting into trouble at school.					
17	26	41	74	88	(246)

STUDENT LIFE STYLE SURVEY

Soc 403. Social Science Research Methods
Texas A&M International University
Dr. Marjorie L. Coppock

November,1993
Laredo, Texas

Summary of data results

Respondents for the study: 251 students from Martin High School, United South High School, Cigarroa Middle School, and United South Junior High School.

Profile characteristics;

- 8% Born in Mexico
- 61% Spanish is language spoken at home
- 24% Father does not live in the home
- 31% Do not receive newspapers or magazines at home

Average number of people in the household - 5.8.
Average hours of television watched each day - 3.6.

Favorite TV shows: Fresh Prince (N=50), Saved by the Bell (N=44), Who's the Boss (N=31), Full House (N=30), Blossom (N=27), Beavis and Butthead (N=22)

Of those listing a preferred job (N=183),

- 52% Professional job (teacher, lawyer, doctor,etc.)
- 14% Law enforcement
- 15% Business (including secretarial work)
- 6% Fine arts (including singer, actor, florist, etc.)
- 5% Career in sports
- 5% Skilled labor

95% agree that they want to graduate from high school, their family wants them to graduate, and that education is important for a good job.
88% agree that 'I am responsible for what I do in life'.
83% agree that they want to go to college.
89% and 86% agree that they want to graduate before marriage or having a child.

77% agree that most of the teachers are trying to help
75% agree that school is a place where they feel comfortable.
75% agree that they can accomplish what they attempt to do.
69% agree that hard work is more important than luck.

48% agree that school is a place where they feel safe.
46% agree that their mother helps them with school work.
42% agree that their father helps them with school work.

23% agree that if you get ahead it is because you are lucky.
21% agree that they would not go to school if they could choose.
19% agree that they cut class whenever they can.
17% agree that they are always in trouble at school.
12% agree that everything they do always turns out wrong.

Summary and Discussion

In analyzing the data and comparing the results to the larger studies discussed in Section One (Salinas, 1988: Schauer and King, 1992) similarities and differences in response patterns are noted. The household study of Salinas showed that 35.5% of the residents were born in Mexico, whereas 8% of the students in the present study were born in Mexico. The percentage of respondents who speak Spanish as their primary language in the home is comparable in the present study and the Salinas study (61% and 63% respectively). Comparison on media utilization shows similarities between the present study and that of Schauer and King (1992). In both studies the television was almost universally the predominant media, whereas newspapers as a source of information in the home were used by about 2/3rds of the households. The students in the present study watched an average of 3.6 hours of television a day (with a range from 0 to 8 hours). Their favorite shows were predominately situation comedies about teenagers. The present study found that 76% of the student respondents lived in nuclear families. This compares with the analysis of Maria de la Paz Lopez, who found a consistent 71% of households along the border composed of nuclear families (Weeks and Ham-Chande, 1992:90).

The students expressed a strong interest in continuing education through high school (95%) and beyond into college (83%). They perceived that their parents also wanted them to graduate (95%). The students were aware that education is important for a good job (95%). These educational aspirations are consistent with the types of jobs preferred. Professional posi-

tions and jobs requiring college backgrounds were predominantly the types of career choices listed by the students. Only 5% of the students aspired to careers in sports or skilled labor jobs. A large majority of the students wanted to graduate from high school before marriage (89%) and before having a child (86%).

About 3/4th of the students feel satisfied with the help received from teachers (77%) and with the school as a place where they feel comfortable (75%). However about 1/5th of the students are not comfortable with the school environment. These students agreed that they would not go to school if they could choose (21%), that they cut classes whenever they can (19%), that they are always in trouble in school (17%), and that everything they do turns out wrong (12%). Contradictions between high educational aspirations and academic frustration were demonstrated by the latter students. A particularly disturbing response is noted was the agreement of only 48% of the respondents that school is a place where they felt safe.

In considering the attitudes of the students toward the role of luck in their lives and the degree of control that they have over their lives, similar responses were noted in the study by Schauer and King (1992). In both studies, only 23% of respondents attached a heavy weight to luck in their lives. The study by Schauer and King showed that 80% of the respondents believed more in hard work and dedication than in luck. This percentage of personal efficacy was shared by the student respondents in this study. The students in the present study agreed that they were responsible for what they do in life (88%), that they could

accomplish what they attempt to do (75%), and that hard work is more important than luck (69%).

Conclusion

This study documented exceptionally high aspirations for education and life style among this sample of 251, predominaantly low income, Hispanic, secondary students on the Texas/Mexico border. The large majority expressed an optimistic attitude accompanied by the belief in hard work and dedication. These responses of high aspirations for education and life style are challenged by the 40-50% drop out rate which is generally the reality for low income Hispanic populations.

The realization of these high aspirations will require increased effort and research aimed at overcoming the obstacles that block these aspirations. Increasing numbers of border development projects, such as the Communities in Schools program and those listed at the end of Section One of this paper can help to improve the life chances of border residents.

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